

BELL-THE-CAT'S DUEL.*

REIGN OF JAMES IV.

MASTER DAVID HUME of Godscroft, as he designates himself on the title-page of his curious work, entitled the "History of the Houses of Douglas and Angus," relates a story of the great Archibald sixth Earl of Angus, known by the soubriquet of *Bell-the-Cat*. This nobleman, still popularly remembered in Scotland, is described as having been "a man every way accomplished both for mind and body; he was for stature tall, and of a strong composition; his countenance was full of majesty, and such as bred reverence in the beholders, wise and eloquent of speech, upright and square in his actions, sober and moderate in his desires, valiant and courageous, a man of action and undertaking; liberal also of heart and hand, loving and kind to his friends,

* History of the Houses of Douglas and Angus; Sir Walter Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*.

which made him to be beloved, revered, and respected by all men."

Among the other qualities of Bell-the-Cat personal valour was conspicuous, and a duel which he fought is thus adduced in proof. It happened one evening, when King James IV. was sitting at table in social conversation with his friends, that the discourse turned on the character and accomplishments of several noblemen who were absent, and the Earl of Angus was pronounced by the whole of them to be superior to his peers. But a gentleman named Spens of Kilspindy thought proper to call in question this opinion, and made several observations in disparagement of the Earl, calling in question his personal courage. This was reported to Bell-the-Cat, and, as is commonly the case with such stories, by the time it reached him it was greatly aggravated and distorted to excite his indignation. A Douglas was not likely to sit patiently under such an insult offered in presence of the King, and least of all was such a man as Bell-the-Cat disposed to pocket any affront in silence. Although greatly irritated at Spens, the Earl resolved to "*bide his time,*" and he soon had an opportunity of calling him to account. The Earl, during one of his progresses from Douglas Castle to his stronghold of Tantallon, which in ruined grandeur proudly overlooks the German Ocean at the entrance of the Frith of Forth, sent his servants and retinue the nearest way, keeping only one to attend him, and each of them had a hawk on his fist to amuse themselves while riding. The Earl took a road by Borthwick in Mid-Lothian towards Fala, and dismounting at a rivulet near the west end of the latter village, he ordered his domestic to wash the birds. Unfortunately for Spens he happened to be riding in that district, and when the Earl descried him at a distance he said to his attendant—"Is not this the man who called my manhood in question? I will go to him, and give him a trial of it, that we may try

who of us is the better man." "No, my Lord," replied the servant, "it is beneath your Lordship's dignity to meddle with him. I shall do it sufficiently, if your Lordship will give me leave." "I see," said the Earl, "that he has one with him. It shall be thy part to grapple with him, while I deal with his master."

Fastening their hawks to prevent them from flying away, the Earl mounted his horse, accompanied by his domestic, and galloped up to Spens. Having overtaken him, Bell-the-Cat angrily asked the reason for speaking of him so contemptuously at such a time, and for expressing his doubts whether the courage of the Earl of Angus was as undoubted as his personal qualities were admitted to be. Spens attempted an apology or explanation, but the Earl told him it was of no use. "Thou art a big fellow," he said, "and so am I; one of us must pay for it." "Then," answered Spens, "if it must be so, there is not an earl in Scotland from whom I will not defend myself as well as I can; and, if I am able, I will kill him, rather than allow him to kill me."

They alighted from their horses and drew their swords, their respective domestics imitating their example. After thrusting at each other for a short time, Bell-the-Cat with one stroke cut his antagonist's thigh-bone asunder, which caused almost immediate death by loss of blood. The two domestics were still belabouring each other, when the Earl ordered them to desist, saying to the servant of Spens— "Go thy way, and tell my gossip the King that there was nothing here but fair play. I know my gossip will be offended, but I will get me into Liddesdale, and remain in the Hermitage till his anger is over." It is supposed that Bell-the-Cat did as he intimated, and took refuge in his stronghold called Hermitage Castle, until the King was pacified.

The sword with which the Earl of Angus cut asunder

the thigh-bone of Spens was presented by his descendant, the Earl of Morton, afterwards Regent, to Lord Lindsay of the Byres, when he defied the Earl of Bothwell to single combat on Carberry Hill.